Establishing a Small Commercial Avairy

Lessons Learned: The First Five Years

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Linda and I bought our first pairs of parrots in January 1994. Now, we have about 50 pairs, mostly Africans and Eclectus with a few cockatoos and Hawk-heads. We have learned so much the hard way that we feel it would be helpful to relate some of our experiences. Much of the information in this article will be old news to experienced aviculturists, but we hope that those who are just getting started in aviculture may learn from this article and not repeat some of our mistakes. We are not trying to discourage you if you want to breed birds. However, we do feel that you should go into aviculture with your eyes open.

Understand Your Commitment

First and foremost, understand your commitment. The decision to breed birds should not be considered lightly. The only reason to breed birds is love of the birds. There are many easier ways to make a living. Aviculture is one of the most demanding professions I can think of. The commitments, both personal and financial, are serious.

Consider the personal commitment. Although it may not involve that many hours each day, breeding birds is a 7-day/week, 365-day/year job. If you don’t feel well, the birds have to eat. If you would like to get away for a weekend, the birds have to eat. If it’s Christmas day, the birds have to eat. There really are only two ways that you can take time off. Either stay small enough that a friend can takeover for a day or two or get large enough so that you can afford employees.

When you have babies, which is the whole idea, your time is even more restricted. If you have good parents and can pull babies at two or three weeks, the babies will need to be on four or five feedings a day when they enter the nursery. An afternoon or evening off is problematic. If you have babies that must be fed from day one because the parents won’t sit the eggs or feed the new hatches, expect to feed every two hours from 6 A.M. until midnight for the first few days. Going to a movie is not an option unless it is a short film and you live close to the theater.

The good news is that if you are like me, you will find nothing more rewarding than watching a baby parrot grow under your care. The long hours are more than rewarded by the growing babies. The bad news is that the last time I took a day off was to attend an AFA convention in July, 1997.

Consider the emotional commitment. If you are like me, it is impossible to breed birds and not get attached to the birds and their babies. But, if you keep birds, you will have to deal with heartbreaking situations. Once when I was mourning the loss of a pair of Great-billed Parrots, a good friend told me that, “He who has a collection of living birds also has a collection of dead birds.” This is true. If you have many pairs of birds, you will lose breeders. If you feed many babies, you will lose babies. I have had both mature birds and babies die in my hands while I was trying to save them. And, it really doesn’t get easier. You love them, and occasionally you will lose them.

Consider the financial commitment. Any commitment to breeding takes money. If you plan to try to breed birds as a profession, it takes a lot of money. Birds are expensive; flights are expensive; brooders, incubators, and nursery equipment are expensive. After setup costs, there are always food and vet bills to consider. We have a small fortune invested in our aviary. We showed a little profit for the first time in 1998 if depreciation is not taken into consideration. I may make minimum wage in 1999. So far, we could have received a much better return on investment in the stock market. But, somehow, stock certificates are not nearly as rewarding as baby birds.

Buying Birds

When we started buying birds we believed whatever we were told. How could people who deal in something as wonderful as parrots be less than honest and upright? Boy, was that a mistake. The first birds we bought were two pairs of Eclectus, a pair of Galahs, and a pair of Goffin’s Cockatoos. We also had two pet Greys. Our vet came over to see our dogs and threw a fit over the fact that we had bought pairs of breeder birds and had not quarantined or done any testing. We didn’t know that we were supposed to.

The first thing she did was draw blood for PBFD testing. Two weeks later, we found out that four of the eight breeder birds we had bought were positive for PBFD along with one of the pet Greys. We got rid of the suspected carrier, the male Goffin’s, and 90 days later all the other birds tested negative. But, these were the longest 90 days of our lives. And, my pet Grey, who tested negative initially, was given to a relative for safe-keeping during the 90-day wait. Bogie spent at least eight hours a day on my shoulder and had a 200+ word vocabulary. He got cooked in a car as a result of negligence on the part of the relative who was keeping him.

When we received the positive test results, we wanted to know where the disease came from and felt that the breeders from whom we bought the birds should know that they had a potential problem. We called the breeder from whom we bought the Eclectus and Galahs. He went into a near panic. He believed that he didn’t have a PBFD problem, but immediately tested the pairs he had that hadn’t been tested. We called the breeder from whom we had bought the Goffin’s. When we bought these birds we were told that they were proven and that the breeder had had them for quite some time. When we told the breeder that we suspected that one of the birds we had bought was a PBFD carrier, we were told that he didn’t know anything about...
the birds and had only had them for a month before we bought them, at which point, the breeder hung up.

This was the most important lesson we learned. Know from whom you are buying. And, regardless of the source, test all birds before you bring them home. Now, we have all birds tested for PBFD, polyoma, and psittacosis before we accept shipment. It adds to the cost, but we sleep much better at night.

**Bonded, Proven, or Producing**

If you are buying pairs of birds, you will see them advertised as bonded or proven. Unfortunately, this doesn’t mean much.

If a pair is described as bonded, it should mean that the pair shows mating behavior but hasn’t yet mated. They perch together. They preen and feed each other. They may be investigating the nest box. What bonded really means is that they have coexisted in the same flight and haven’t mutilated or killed each other, although a few toes may be missing.

If a pair is described as proven, it should mean that the pair makes babies. What proven really means is that the pair may have laid a fertile egg sometime in the last 10 years. And, more than one hopeful novice breeder has bought a proven pair that turned out to be two males or two females.

In our opinion, when you are buying sexually mature birds there are only two kinds of pairs — producing and nonproducing. Although our definition is arbitrary, we define a producing pair as a pair that has laid fertile eggs in the last year or two out of the last three years. We define nonproducing pairs as everything else.

So, if you want to buy good pairs, how do you do it? We think that there are only two ways. The best way is to buy from folks you know. The next best way is to join the AFA and review the Fast Ads. Look for breeders who offered their best pairs to their friends.

We have had only one bad experience with a plucked bird. A plucked bird may have to be brought in during cold weather, especially if it does not sleep in the nest box. Does the bird have a serious beak overgrowth problem? This can affect a hen’s ability to feed chicks and requires routine maintenance. Does the bird have all its toes and legs? If a bird is missing a leg, obviously it may cause a problem in its ability to breed. Will the pair incubate eggs? If not, you will need to invest in an incubator or have a good foster pair. Will the pair feed babies? Not all do, and you will have to feed day-ones if the pair won’t. Although you shouldn’t have to ask whether a bird has all its body parts or has other problems, chances are if you don’t ask, you won’t find out a problem exists until you pick the bird up at the airport. Finally, if you breed birds for which it is important to keep subspecies separate, you should request photographs. You would be amazed at the confusion about some subspecies even among experienced breeders.

**Do Your Homework**

Finally, do your homework on the birds you are considering. Do you have close neighbors? Moluccans may not be a good choice. Are you considering Hawk-headed? Mate aggression is a major potential problem. Do you love Great Bills? They are notorious for dismantling flights. Love those Jardine’s? Aspergillosis is a potential problem. Simply put, learn all you can about the birds you are considering before you actually buy them.

**Setting Up:**

**Do it Right the First Time**

When we started setting up pairs we tried to save money and do it ourselves. Big mistake. I built many flights using 2 X 4s for stands and 1 X 2 mesh wire for the flights. The first problem was that the stands made out of 2 X 4s were unstable and fell apart without constant maintenance. The next problem was much more serious. As it turns out, a rat can go through the legs. And, even if they do manage to, the worst that a typical snake can do is eat an egg or baby. Pairs are not at risk.

What pairs are at risk from are raccoons. If you don’t have the stomach to shoot a raccoon, don’t breed birds in an outside aviary. Raccoons are very intelligent. Raccoons have long skinny fingers. Raccoons will scare birds in suspended flights until they end up on the bottoms stunned, then reach through and tear the birds apart at their leisure.

We have had only one bad experience with a raccoon. About two years ago,
PRESENTING
PARROT
SPECIALTY FOODS
For Breeders & Hobbyists

Genuinely Balanced Formulas of Vital & Pure Ingredients, Resulting in Foods with High Biological Value, to Help Ensure an Active, Healthy Life for your Bird.

TROPICAN
FORMULATED FOOD
Special Hand Feeding Formula for Babies
Micro-ground Extruded Formula
B-2661, 1kg (2.2 lb)  B-2262, 5kg (11 lb)
Natural Extruded Granules
Comes in two granule sizes:
Cockatiel and Parrot.
Tropic contains seven different grains and nuts with natural colors and fruit flavors for maximum nutrition and palatability. Less powder waste, along with higher caloric value, making it very economical to feed.

Life-Time/Maintenance Granules
Cockatiel:  B-2527, 3.6 kg (8 lb)
B-2528, 9.1 kg (20 lb)
B-2529, 18.2 kg (40 lb)
Parrot:    B-2627, 3.6 kg (8 lb)
B-2628, 9.1 kg (20 lb)
B-2629, 18.2 kg (40 lb)

High-Performance/Breeding Granules
Cockatiel:  B-2532, 3.6 kg (8 lb)
B-2533, 9.1 kg (20 lb)
B-2534, 18.2 kg (40 lb)
Parrot:    B-2622, 3.6 kg (8 lb)
B-2533, 9.1 kg (20 lb)
B-2624, 18.2 kg (40 lb)

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TROPICAN FOOD STICKS
Same Premium Tropic Formulas
Sticks are larger and longer, designed for large parrots who like to pick up their food and hold it.

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B-2615, 3.6 kg (8 lb)
B-2616, 9.1 kg (20 lb)
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Tropical Life-Time Maintenance Parrot Food Sticks
B-2611, 3.6 kg (8 lb)
B-2612, 9.1 kg (20 lb)
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Gourmet
SEED, FRUIT, NUT & VEGETABLE MIX Fortified with Tropic
Rich variety for fun, Parrot food can be soaked with warm water to rehydrate fruits and vegetables.

Cockatiel: B-2804, 5 kg (11 lb)
Parrot: B-2809, 4.5 kg (10 lb)
Parrot Gourmet is 100% edible fruits, veggies, and nuts, no messy shells

• *All foods are packed in Gas-Flushed Air Barrier Bags * with the exception of 40 lb sizes which have no fruit flavor or CO2 gas.
• Protects package from environmental deterioration. Carbon dioxide gas slows oxidation of nutrients and prevents bug infestation.
• Exceptional Quality Control. Each batch is tested for quality and guaranteed analysis.
• Fed to HARI's birds before being released.
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http://www.pubnix.net/~mhagen/
one got into the yard and tore a
Jardine's apart through 1/2 X 3 inch
mesh. It scared a Red-bellied Parrot to
the point that the bird killed itself in the
flight. And, it scared a Brown-headed to
the point that the bird injured itself and
abandoned three babies, which subse-
quently froze to death. That was one
expensive night. And I have little toler-
ance for raccoons as a result.

Although opossums may not try to
get birds through the cage wire, they
must be controlled, too. Sarcocystis is
a protozoal disease that is dangerous
for all psittacines and especially dead-
ly for old-world birds. Opossums are
part of the organism's life cycle. The
protozoan is shed in the feces and car-
ried by flies and roaches. If you have
opossums, chances are that you will
loose birds to sarcocystis.

Even hawks can be a problem. We
have friends who have lost birds to
hawks through the cage wire. This
presents an awkward situation to the
aviculturist because they are federally
protected.

Miscellaneous Hazards
When you set birds up, assume that
if they can get into trouble they will.
And, assume that if something can go
wrong, it will. Here are a few of the
hazards of which we have learned the
hard way.

Leaky Nest Boxes
We knew that our nest boxes had
the potential to leak around the doors.
So, we put roofs above all the nest
boxes. For two years we never had a
box with wet material. Last year, we
had a week of steady rain. We had a
Cape hen on two babies. The babies
died because the nest box material
was soaked. It never occurred to me to
check the box for wet material
because it had been bone dry for over
two years.

Perching on Metal
If you maintain an outside aviary in
a part of the country where tempera-
tures fall below freezing, you already
know that you must keep your birds
dry and out of the wind. But, inspect
your flights and ensure that it is impos-
sible for your birds to perch on metal
instead of wood. Our nest boxes have
safety flanges to keep birds from getting
tangled between the entrance holes and
the cage wire. However, this safety fea-
ture can be a hazard. We lost a Cape
hen that decided to perch on top of the
flange on a freezing night. Her feet
froze; she chewed her toes off when
they started thawing; and we found her
dead in the bottom of the flight.

Over-Feeding
It is easy to be too nice to your
birds. Parrots and other birds are
evolved to expend large amounts of
energy while flying and foraging. Parrots in breeding flights get a very
small percentage of the exercise that
they would get in nature. Yet, they are
typicaly presented with large amounts
of food often of high fat content.
Although pairs may do well on exces-
sive diets for a few years, eventually
the excess calories will cause prob-
lems. Recently, we lost an Eclectus hen
that had so much fat in her body cavity
that it was crowding the internal
organs and causing them to atrophy.
Now, all our birds are on a diet. The
current ration for each pair during the
off-season is 1/8 cup seed, 1/2 cup low-
fat pellets, and no-fat produce. And we
are waiting to see if we need to reduce
this further.

Fiber Board
This one shouldn't be a problem for
most breeders, but naturally we
learned about it the hard way. When
we were just getting started our birds
were outside in cages that didn't have
sheet-metal wind and rain shields. The
weather got nasty, so we covered the
tops of the cages with Masonite. For
some bizarre reason, a Grey decided
that the Masonite was tasty. He totally
impacted his digestive tract and died
of starvation.

Summary
We have found breeding birds to be
incredibly rewarding. We do it because
we love the birds. But, many of the
lessons we have learned have been
learned the hard way at significant cost.
We hope that this article will help some
of you who are just starting avoid some
of our mistakes.